

**ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW
#361**

**HOWARD H. JOHNSON
USS *ARIZONA*, FORMER CREW MEMBER**

**INTERVIEWED ON
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BY ??**

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**USS *ARIZONA* MEMORIAL
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE
ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION**

Howard H. Johnson (HJ): ...Johnson.

?: I'm sorry, what was that? Howard?

HJ: Howard H. Johnson.

?: Howard H. Johnson. Okay. Where were you born, Mr. Johnson?

HJ: Born in Gainesville, Georgia, 1897.

?: Okay. How old were you when you were aboard the *Arizona*?

HJ: I was about seventeen and a half.

?: You were seventeen and a half. Okay. And you said you were aboard the *Arizona* on her commissioning date?

HJ: At Brooklyn Navy Yard.

?: Okay. Were you present for the commissioning ceremony?

HJ: Yeah.

?: What was that like? Do you remember?

HJ: It was very impressive. It was a pretty nice ceremony and the captain made some kind of an address. I don't remember what his name was, but it was an impressive ceremony.

?: From the commissioning, where did the *Arizona* go from there?

HJ: Well, she left Brooklyn Navy Yard and went on a shakedown cruise, down to _____ Cuba. And they had trouble with an engine, one turbine went bad. Somebody had left a wrench

or something in it or somebody either threw one it, I don't know which. But anyway, she had to travel back to the navy yard and have that repaired. And I went to Guantanamo with her and I left the *Arizona* while she was in Yorktown, Virginia. The fleet was in Yorktown, Virginia in 1916. And she was commissioned, I think, in about, I wouldn't swear to that, but I think about either March or April of 1916.

?: Right. And so you left her a year later?

HJ: And I stayed on her for about a year. I transferred from her about a week before World War I was declared.

?: Mm-hmm.

HJ: They had decided to put guns and I was a gun captain on a five-inch gun. And they put the guns on merchant ships.

?: Mm-hmm.

HJ: So twenty-six men, that's four gun crews and a lieutenant was transferred to the *Arizona* and we, the first trip I made to England with that crew, on that trip, about _____ the United States entered the war, and _____ on that. That was a large merchant ship, combination ship of passenger and cargo. And just before she sailed to _____, the passenger list was sent into shore. I was only on the *Arizona*, I guess, not quite a year.

?: Mm-hmm. What was your position on the *Arizona*? What was your...

HJ: At that time, I was second class boatswain mate.

?: Mm-hmm.

HJ: And a gun captain.

?: Which gun did you man, on the, which turret?

HJ: Well, I fired on those fourteen-inch guns. The *Arizona* had fourteen-inch and five-inch.

?: Mm-hmm.

HJ: I fired on the fourteen-inch guns and also on the five-inch guns. But I was gun captain on the five-inch guns.

?: How many people, how many men were first assigned to the *Arizona*?

HJ: If I remember right, about 1200.

?: About 1200?

HJ: About 1200. And they were composed of men from three ships. I had been, prior to the *Arizona*, on the *New*

Hampshire, Battleship *New Hampshire*, old coal-burning battleship. In fact, all of them burned coal in those days!

?: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm.

HJ: And they had crews from the *Vermont* and the *Louisiana* and the *Arizona* was the original crew of the *Arizona*.

?: Mm-hmm. What were you doing on the morning of December 7[, 1941]? Do you remember?

HJ: No, I don't. I think I was at a football game. I'm sure I was. They had the professional football team in Charlotte and I was certainly out there looking at that football game when they announced it on the loudspeaker.

?: Mm-hmm. How long was it before you found out that the *Arizona* was one of the battleships bombed in Pearl Harbor?

HJ: Well, that was announced right after the bombing, that the *Arizona* had gone down. And that game continued on though. That was—I think Charlotte had a professional football team in, that's where I was, that stadium, looking at a football game.

?: What were your feelings when you found out that the *Arizona* was one of the ships that was destroyed?

HJ: Well, I was sorry to see the old girl go down. Sorry to see any of 'em go down. Terrible thing.

?: After World War I, when you came back home, what occupation did you do?

HJ: I went home and went in business with my father and brother in the retail coal business.

?: Mm-hmm.

HJ: And I retired about twenty years ago, after working some forty years.

?: Mm-hmm. Did any of your sons go into World War II?

HJ: Yeah. I had a boy in the Air Force in World War II. Then _____ got me back in World War II. I had to register.

?: Oh, you went back and registered?

HJ: Yeah, but I didn't go in. I could've gone in. They offered me a warrant officer's job if I'd go back in, but I was too busy making a living.

?: Mm-hmm.

HJ: And I'd come out of the service bureau disgusted with it anyway. After World War I, they sent me to Newport, Rhode

Island as an instructor. I couldn't take that.

_____. Doesn't appeal to me, have to get 'em up in the morning at *Reveille* and put 'em to bed at night, at *Taps* and I wasn't accustomed to anything like that. I asked to come out an officer but transfer back to sea. They asked me, "You gotta stay in two years to get a transfer on a boat."

I said, "I'm gonna stay in two years."

They had passed a law that anybody, I had re-enlisted. Anybody that had re-enlisted during the war could get a discharge. I applied for discharge and got out. I was in the service for over six years.

?: Mm-hmm. Back to the *Arizona*, could you tell me what it was like to be aboard the *Arizona* in those early years?

HJ: Well, the *Arizona* was a very modern ship for those days.

That was an oil-burning ship and none of that crew had ever

been accustomed to a ship that burned oil. We always had to take home coal about once a month and that was the dirtiest job in the world, getting coal in one of those ships.

?: Mm-hmm.

HJ: And she was very modern and up-to-date. The crew was very proud of her. Very proud of her. Living conditions were a lot better on the ship as new as the *Arizona* than on some of the older ships.

?: Can you describe what it was like to live aboard the *Arizona*?

HJ: Well, we used to have *Reveille* at five o'clock in the morning and then scrub decks down and serve you a big pot of coffee in a bowl and _____ mess cook get a big can of coffee and hang it up. We'd get a bowl for that coffee and then we'd scrub down the decks _____. And breakfast

was served at seven. We had a mess table that just swung up over our head and folded up. The mess cook had to serve for three months and go draw dishes from the scullery and get his two tables down and set 'em up for twenty men, ten men per table. Then he'd serve breakfast. And then they'd fold down about nine-thirty and then they'd do an inspection. You had to be cleaned up by that time. Most of the *Arizona* had a good laundry on there. We put clothes in the laundry. Back in the older ships, they were, you got two buckets of fresh water a day and you took a bath in that and washed your clothes too!

(Laughter)

HJ: Plenty of salt-water showers, but you got a water line that stayed locked all the time. Open it up one day and you get a big bucket full of fresh water. And you take a bath in that and they'll turn on the salt-water shower. Dropped your clothes right in that same water and washed 'em. They had

to be clean too. The *Arizona* was quite a contrast when you could put your clothes in the laundry.

?: They had a washing machine then, huh?

HJ: I don't know what they had. They had a laundry at any rate, put your clothes in. No, I guess it was something similar to a washing machine. They had a regular laundry for the ship.

?: And so you had normal showers then too?

HJ: Yeah.

?: How many men did you share a compartment with?

HJ: Share an apartment?

?: Compartment, on board ship?

HJ: Divided up into different divisions. Each division _____ board a ship. You slung your hammock in that thing. You slept in a hammock in those days. There's no bunks. I couldn't get in one down myself. I had a hammock with a mattress in it and mattress cover over the thing. Blanket, two blankets and you slung that hammock up there and hooked it up and slept very good. I slept in one for a long time!

In the morning, you had to get up and lash that thing up and store it in what they call a hammock netting. You stuck those hammocks all in the netting there. They'd have *Taps* about nine o'clock and you had to have those hammocks strung. The *Arizona* still use hammocks. These ships today, they tell me they got bunks. They don't have hammocks. They don't know about hammocks. We slept in hammocks. We used to do that often.

In Mexico or Cuba, down there in the south, it'd get so hot, we'd have a swimming call two or three times a day _____ a pair of your trousers and _____ underwear. You'd take a bath in a bucket of that water and jump overboard and swim around for fifteen, twenty minutes, wash them clothes out in that bucket of water and hang 'em over the railing and come back in about twenty minutes and put the same clothes back on. It'd be dry, it's so hot. (Chuckles)

?: What was it like to man a gun and be inside the gun turret, I assume?

HJ: Well, that was pretty exciting, you have a gun, _____ and we, coming back, once, to the Mainland out on a cargo ship, SS *Minnesota*. Belonged to the Great Northern Line out of New York. And we liked to run over a submarine. We didn't see him until he was so close inboard, the bow couldn't _____ at all and

the port gun, he was so close inboard, when you passed him then and he fired, he got that gun down depressed just as low as it'd go and fine, but the submarine's so close to the ship, it shot over and missed him. Of course, he didn't consider he had no chance then if we countered a submarine like that you'd get sunk. Captain put that force _____ and took off and we left at that point in time.

(Laughter)

HJ: We didn't get that sub but he was scared to death, I know. You could hear him batten down those hatches, trying to—I think they had to charge the batteries with the submarines they had back there in World War I, those U-boats. They run on batteries. They might have a day or two, they had to come up and lay on the surface and recharge those batteries. And we caught that one laying on the surface. And he hadn't seen us and _____ you couldn't

even strike a match on the deck. We'd run without lights and run wide open. Just a little bit more and we'd have had him. We could've rammed him but didn't.

After that, _____ shot at him and that _____ across the ship. We keep getting away from the *Arizona*, and now I'm starting into something else!

(Laughter)

HJ: I told you all about I can tell you about the *Arizona* anyway, I guess.

?: Okay, is there anything...

HJ: She was the best ship. I hated to see her sunk.

?: Did you have any friends aboard the *Arizona* that morning?

HJ: No. No, it had been so long ago, the crew would've turned over a time or two.

?: What did it feel like to you today to go out there and view the remains of the *Arizona* and see the memorial?

HJ: Oh, I _____ remorseful _____ because that's one thing in particular why I drove over here. I wanted to go to this memorial. But I had lots of friends on her years ago. She was a good ship.

?: Will you be returning for the fiftieth anniversary?

HJ: Did I what?

?: Will you be returning next year for the fiftieth anniversary?

HJ: Fiftieth anniversary?

?: Of the attack on Pearl Harbor?

HJ: I don't know. (Inaudible)

?: Okay. Well, thank you very much.

HJ: You're quite welcome.

?: I'm glad we got this information down on tape and thank you
for stopping in.

HJ: I'm sorry I couldn't help you more!

?: Oh, you helped us plenty!

END OF INTERVIEW